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Breathe easy say smoke researchers

PASSIVE smoking does not pose a significant cancer risk, top scientists said yesterday.

The finding, based on an analysis of 43 studies published worldwide, flies in the face of the widely-held view that inhaling other people's tobacco smoke is dangerous.

It could have important implications for the regulation of smoking in public places.

The research was carried out by respected European experts on molecular biology, genetics and statistics. They concluded that previous thinking about the hazards of environmental tobacco smoke (ETS) based on experiments with laboratory rats was misplaced.

Earlier studies had also been prone to distortion due to statistical bias, it was claimed.

However, anti-smoking campaigners are quick to point out that the study was sponsored by three major tobacco companies, Philip Morris Europe, British-American Tobacco and Rothmans International. They also stress that it ignores harmful effects other than cancer, like bronchitis.

The scientists insist they maintained a strictly neutral stance throughout. Professor Jeffrey Idle, who chaired the working group, said he only agreed to set up the research on the strict understanding that even if the results were unfavourable to tobacco interests they would be published in full.

In 1992 the US Environmental Protection Agency classified ETS as a class-A carcinogen, setting the benchmark for attitudes towards passive smoking today.

But according to the new study the evidence on which this conclusion was based was flawed. Recent research had shown that just because rats exposed to high doses of a cancer causing chemical developed tumours this did not mean lower levels of the same substance would provoke a reduced risk to humans.

Prof Idle, a molecular biologist at Trondheim University, Norway, said yesterday: "What has been appreciated since then is that at low exposure levels we have defence mechanisms that get rid of these chemicals and repair the damage. The chemical constituents of ETS are at a very low concentration indeed."

He said statistical errors had resulted from people wrongly stating to researchers that they were non-smokers or had never smoked.

Prof Idle said he hoped those responsible for setting the rules for smoking in public places would take notice of the scientific evidence.

He said: "Our bottom line is that there is no reason for believing that environmental tobacco smoke increases the risk of getting lung cancer."

A spokeswoman for the anti-smoking pressure group ASH (Action on Smoking and Health) said: "This study is funded by the tobacco industry and therefore we're not surprised by the findings. But just about every other independent scientist who has looked at this issue has come to the contrary conclusion.

"There are also other problems associated with smoking like bronchitis and emphysema."

Source: https://www.industrydocuments.ucsf.edu/docs/xzgj0001

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